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## Small Islands, Rising Seas

"You know that with a sea-level rise of over 1.5 metres, hundreds of millions of people would be dead. They would simply be wiped out," President Mohamed Nasheed of the Republic of Maldives told the UN Chronicle just two days after he addressed other world leaders at the 2009 UN General Assembly Summit on Climate Change.

The threat posed by rising sea levels has been the centrepiece of climate change negotiations, the main issue emphasized by Small Island Developing States, also known as the SIDS.

With less than a month to go until the December 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, many who regard global warming as some vague phenomenon are perhaps beginning to wonder how their lives might be affected down the road. But there is no need to look into the future to see that SIDS are already threatened by escalating tides, cyclones, flooding, damaged crops, increased disease, the inundation of coastal areas and the loss of freshwater supplies. SIDS are indeed on the "front lines" of climate change. The post-industrial age of mass fossil fuel consumption has dramatically accelerated the amount of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) to dangerous levels, damaging the environment and infrastructure of many SIDS and other low-lying regions.

The poorer countries flanked by large bodies of water -- who have contributed the least to global warming, including rapid sea-level rise -- now find themselves at the precarious mercy of the historical polluters. Developed neighbours in the global North are losing their credibility very quickly, Ambassador Ronny Jumeau, Permanent Representative of the Seychelles to the United Nations told the UN Chronicle. "Let's say my neighbour flooded my house entirely on his own, while I didn't contribute. Yet, I have to now borrow money from him, then pay him interest for the rest of my life, in order to clean the mess in my house that he is responsible for. This is dishonest."

### The Seeds of an Alliance

At the United Nations, 43 of the world's smallest island and low-lying coastal countries, representing the Member States most susceptible to change in climate, forged a coalition called the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS). While AOSIS represents more than one quarter of the world's countries, together they account for less than one per cent of global carbon emissions. Once the former President of the Republic of Maldives,

Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, gave a dramatic speech referred to as the "Death of a Nation" at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting and at the UN General Assembly in October 1987, the idea of a bloc of island nations gained momentum. Three years later, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published its first assessment on climate change coinciding with the 1990 Second World Climate Conference in Geneva, and SIDS was born. Ambassadors of small island States refer to President Gayoom as the "brainchild" of their coalition. Twenty two years later, in the UN General Assembly Hall, President Nasheed told world leaders that they must "discard the habits that have led to 20 years of complacency and broken promises on climate change," made in 1990.

### **Negotiating Positions vs. Interests**

At a press conference at UN Headquarters in July 2009, Ambassador Desama Williams, Permanent Representative of Grenada to the United Nations and the current chairperson of AOSIS, stressed the need to reduce the level of temperature increases to a figure less than 1.5°C; Celsius, both as short and medium targets. She said, "Without adequate global commitments to make deep cuts to temperature increases caused by greenhouse gas emissions, small islands would be the first to be washed away into the sea."

To prevent islands from sinking into the ocean, each Member State should put aside the stand-off surrounding the thorny adaptation and mitigation issues and focus on their collective global interest. Thus far, positional arguments, a term in negotiations referring to arguing over precise numbers, have brought little success. What's needed now to overcome the political challenges is an enduring and practical solution that all Member States can rally behind -- a realistic and substantive climate policy that ensures economic growth and sustainable development in all regions of the world.

But how can tiny islands like Comoros or Palau carry enough bargaining chips to convince the international community to make this issue a call to action? The cruel irony, according to Ambassador Jumeau, is that SIDS find themselves in a tough bind if they talk any louder than they do: "We can't go on a crusade around the world. The more noise we make, the more we scare away investors and tourists and destroy our own livelihood," the Ambassador said.

While these countries face limitations on how much they can blame the industrialized North, Ambassador Jumeau pointed out that "the climate change debate doesn't happen in a vacuum. We maintain good relations with our former colonial masters, France and the United Kingdom, so we cannot just come out and bash them tomorrow. And we don't have natural allies in the South either; even that requires fierce negotiations. So what you have is a group of increasingly frustrated States."

### **The Beacons of the World**

But while frustration may be prevalent among SIDS, they have been crucial drivers in pushing climate change on to the United Nations agenda and instrumental in reaching international agreements in the past. One example is the role Papua New Guinea played by bringing the Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) into discussions during the December 2007 UN Climate Change Conference in Bali, Indonesia.

Essentially, the REDD forests-for-carbon credits initiative is meant to reduce emissions in developing countries by funding conservation, reforestation and poverty reduction while fighting climate change.

Professor Graciela Chichilnisky of Columbia University, who was involved in the drafting of the Kyoto Protocol told the UN Chronicle, "While Papua New Guinea is a very tiny nation, it essentially pulled the United States into the Kyoto process with its intervention and accepted reforestation in exchange for carbon credits". On the last day of the Bali conference, Kevin Conrad, a member of the Papua New Guinea delegation, responded after Paula Dobriansky, a U.S. delegate, noted any unwillingness by the U.S. to support the Bali Road Map. (The Map charts the course for a new negotiating process designed to tackle climate change, with the aim of completing this by 2009.) Mr Conrad interjected, "There is an old saying: if you are not willing to lead, leave it to the rest of us. Please get out of our way." The room flooded with applause and several minutes later, Ms Dobriansky reversed the position of the U.S.

As a unified voice backed by the UN system, AOSIS is exemplary in the way it wields clout to reverberate its position and the way it strategizes on climate policy. Professor Chichilnisky explained the crucial role AOSIS plays in drafting climate policy. "Any agreement that the island States accept would be difficult for the G-77 (group of developing countries) to reject. So in that sense they have the decision-making power." In an interview with the UN Chronicle, Ambassador Ahmed Khaleel, the Permanent Representative of Maldives to the United Nations said: "The success of AOSIS is that we share a common passion and have been strict about speaking with one voice and sticking with one voice. We don't give in on key principles of climate change." **The Global Security Element** Speaking to the UN Chronicle, President Nasheed warned that the conflict over climate change could escalate, causing disruption to many parts of the world. "Countries are now under threat because of climate change and because of the stress climate change has on resources. It's not just an environmental issue; it's now about a global security issue."

President Nasheed spoke about the global security element as a consequence of a significant milestone that a regional group of small island developing States from the Pacific reached last June when the General Assembly passed a resolution recognizing the possible security implications of climate change. While the resolution, co-sponsored by all AOSIS members, is non-binding, it does represent a symbolic victory to establish moral weight and move climate change onto the agenda for the more powerful UN Security Council.

In an interview with the UN Chronicle, Caleb Christopher, legal advisor to the Permanent Mission of the Republic of the Marshall Islands to the United Nations, said his country's position is that climate change is a threat to national security and global stability. The argument is that, essentially, if you lose one country that is a member of the United Nations, that in and of itself poses a serious international issue. Mr Christopher contended that "based on the language of Article 1 of the UN Charter, there isn't much of a distinction between a military army invading and sea-level rise sinking an island into extinction." The relevance of climate change as a security matter is also important in how resources will be focused to reduce vulnerability to climate change.

### **Imminent Danger: Point of No Return**

With climate change emerging as a security issue, one thing is certain, that the international community in 2009 has reached a global consensus: the scientific argument about whether global warming is real, is over. "With the effects of climate change real and immediate, those with dissenting views about the implications of global warming now have their head stuck in the sand," Raymond Wolfe, the Permanent Representative of Jamaica to the United Nations told the UN Chronicle. "For the Caribbean region, hurricanes present a clear and present danger; they are occurring more intensely and at alarming levels." In fact, the cost of Hurricane Ivan which struck the Caribbean Island of Grenada destroyed 90 per cent of built infrastructure -- nearly twice the value of the country's annual gross domestic product (GDP). In addition to hurricanes, Ambassador Wolfe said, "We've also been hit by a triple tsunami -- a food, energy, and financial crisis -- all of which have been exacerbated by climate change."

### **The Boomerang Economy**

The economy of the Maldives has been greatly affected by the 2004 tsunami caused by the Indian Ocean earthquake; the environmental refugee crisis is the latest battle in their fight to prevent extinction. The tsunami that took a devastating toll of human life in other countries in the Indian Ocean luckily spared the inhabitants of the Maldives due to the country's lack of a continental shelf, which prevented the high-speed build-up of waves crashing intensely onto its shores as it did in neighbouring India, Sri Lanka and elsewhere. Ambassador Khaleel said, "While human toll of the tsunami resulted in 120 people dead, economically, Maldives was hardest hit. We lost six seaports and our main source of freshwater. Over 68 per cent of our GDP was wiped out within two minutes."

The lasting effects of the tsunami are an indication of how damaging rising sea levels actually are. After four years of recovering from the tsunami, evacuating people from sinking islands and saddled with a high debt to income, Maldives experienced another round of assault when the food crisis hit two years later, followed by the global financial crisis. Yet, despite all these setbacks, Maldives has been adapting strict environmental codes and is going green. President Nasheed told the UN Chronicle, "We are investing money in capturing carbon with a bio-charge project and putting more money into renewable energy plants -- wind mills and solar panels -- that we can harness." Explaining how more than 30 per cent of global carbon emissions come directly from buildings, President Nasheed said, "We have been enforcing strict building codes that are reducing energy and increasing efficiency. In a sense we will develop a survival kit that will also achieve our objectives."

The global financial crisis may further affect the resilience of small islands. In the first quarter of 2009, high-end tourism in Maldives plunged 11 per cent, according to Ambassador Khaleel. But not all well-heeled tourists will cease to visit their favourite holiday spots. Climate change will stop tourists from visiting long before any enduring financial crisis. "Every crisis has a silver lining though," Ambassador Khaleel said, adding "time is something we cannot afford. We need things to be done as quickly as possible. For us, it means do-or-die." Even with so many issues to grapple with, an economy so heavily reliant on tourism, Maldives is doing a variety of things to become the first carbon-neutral country by 2020. President Nasheed said,

"There is no reason why no other country cannot do the same. We understand the costs involved to replace existing energy. We want to focus on what you should do, not what we shouldn't."

### **Mitigating Human Issues**

The humanitarian issues facing the people of small island States who are internally displaced or evacuating their island are being ignored by the international community, according to Ambassador Khaleel. Even with the threat of mass migration and litigation against major greenhouse polluters, the problem of climate change refugees has been left unresolved. Ambassador Khaleel observed that a "lack of fresh sources of water is a major issue that is creating tensions and causing refugees." Under international law, people displaced by climate change are not recognized as a group with defined rights or as a group in need of special protection. They do not fall within the definition of the 1951 Refugee Convention and therefore lack the same legal rights.

After intense lobbying by Maldives, small islands achieved a breakthrough on human rights in March 2008, when the UN Human Rights Council passed a resolution that climate change "poses an immediate and far-reaching threat to people and communities around the world."

"The message is that hope is not lost," said Mr Christopher, as he explained how the UN High Commissioner for Refugees issued a report to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) last May about the statelessness of populations on sinking islands. While climate change refugees may not have refugee rights, they are recognized under Article 1 of the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, which defines a stateless person as: "A person who is not considered a national by any State under the operation of its law. Should a State cease to exist, citizenship of that State would cease, as there would no longer be a State of which a person could be a national." The question is then the extent to which climate change could affect statehood. **The Diplomatic**

### **Confrontation**

Back in New York, negotiators of SIDS who are increasingly looking to the West to take the lead are realizing that the focus of the developed world is primarily on China and India. Like the powerhouses in the East, Brazil is the third largest emitter in the developing world, and it has similar concerns as China and India regarding climate change negotiations. Speaking to the UN Chronicle, Paulo Chiarielli, First Secretary at the Permanent Mission of Brazil to the United Nations said, "Brazil has mitigated climate change by investing heavily in renewable sources of energy, such as ethanol. We can provide an example to other countries on how to build a low-carbon economy. But, in order for developing countries to get there, financial and technological support from the developed countries is required." But questions of financial resources and technical support are where the negotiation stalemate is. Singapore is one AOSIS member concerned about the core issues that affect the SIDS. Ambassador Vanu Gopala Menon, the country's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, told the UN Chronicle, "We believe that the biggest burden should be placed on countries that have polluted the most in the past. In particular, developed countries should help developing States, especially small island States." The developed countries want firm commitments from developing countries before making any concessions. But Ambassador Menon said, "If you want the developing world to come on board, you have to make financing and

technology available. It cannot be just a case of you (the developed countries) developing the technology and sending it to developing countries, expecting them to buy from you and attain the standards you want them to achieve."

While there has been engagement of the international community on climate change, no one is willing yet to put actual numbers on the table. Mr Christopher said, "Annex I countries<sup>[1]</sup> don't want to be nailed without knowing what other countries are doing. This is the major reason why no one is agreeing on the text and what the exact table is going to look like." According to Mr Christopher, the two rounds of negotiation talks in June 2008 and again in August 2009 in Bonn, Germany, amounted to the narrowing down and streamlining of the 200-plus pages of draft text. There was no quid pro quo. A few thousand square brackets remain as points of contention.

AOSIS believes that Annex 1 countries must not engage in economic opportunism when dealing with climate change. Referring to these countries, Ambassador Wolfe said, "When it suited you, you endlessly polluted the Earth with greenhouse emissions to generate wealth and strengthen your economies, now you need to set the example and take the lead before you demand we take radical cuts." Ambassador Jumeau said, "Where are these guys coming from? When poor countries come out as the villains it's truly a sad state of affairs. We just don't see India and China in the same light. Pollution per capita in both [of these countries] is fairly low. What is the carbon footprint of each Chinese compared to a person in the United States or elsewhere in the North?"

Ambassador Jumeau went further to explain how countries in the North use per capita when it is most convenient for them, especially when figures are stacked up against them. One of the challenges in using per capita figures for small islands is that while they remain the most vulnerable to climate change, many will be graduating to a middle-income country, which means a lot of benefits will cease to exist, making their ability to adapt to climate change all the more daunting. Ambassador Khaleel said, "We are graduating in January 2010, but that doesn't reduce our vulnerability. It just makes matters worse."

In an interview with the UN Chronicle, Ambassador Carsten Staur, the Permanent Representative of Denmark to the United Nations said, "Of course, the problem has been created by industrialized countries. Now we are asking everybody to participate in resolving it. We know it's a tall order. On the other hand, even if there were no further emissions from countries to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), we would still not be able to limit the increase in global temperature to 2&deg; Celsius. So developing countries and emerging economies will have to be part of the solution, with our support, of course."

But developing countries approach climate change around the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities", which informs the UNFCCC and recognizes the differences in the historical contributions of developed and developing countries to global environmental problems. Ambassador Jumeau said, "If you are in a position to do something about climate change, lead by example. People with the means and capacity live in the

West," explaining how it would sound to turn around the developed world's argument: "Since we are polluting the least, we should do the least," he said.

### **The Crux of Globalization**

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon refers to a time of "multiple crises" where sudden hikes in fuel and food prices, the financial crisis, and the outbreak of flu are exacerbating the ability to safeguard against climate change. But there is nothing inherent in global politics, technology, or the sheer availability of resources on the planet to prevent the social and ecological crises resulting from climate change, according to Jeffrey Sachs in his book *Common Wealth*. It is, according to Mr Sachs, the barriers in the limited capacity to cooperate on a global level that is preventing a substantive agreement. Mr Sachs writes, "The paradox of a unified global economy and divided global society poses the single greatest threat to the planet because it makes impossible the cooperation needed to address the remaining challenges."

Climate change is the most evident example of rapid globalization, according to Caleb Christopher. "This is a highly complex issue, probably the most challenging and unique issue of our time. Global cooperation is needed in order to succeed," he said. UN Secretary General Ban, in his keynote speech to the World Federation of United Nations Associations, stressed that "we have less than ten years to halt the global rise in greenhouse gas emissions if we are to avoid catastrophic consequences for people and the planet."

### **Paradise Life after the Meltdown**

In the context of the aftermath of the financial crisis and the current global recession, "climate change is now a threat multiplier," Ambassador Staur told the UN Chronicle, adding that "the cost of changing the 'business as usual' to a low-carbon society will require the commitment of all of us. But it will also be an opportunity for a new growth trajectory for the future."

Small islands have no choice but to commit themselves to an agreement. Many SIDS import 80 to 90 per cent of what they consume, do not have enough land for agricultural self-sufficiency, are even more prone to global shocks, and don't have the luxury to write themselves a bailout stimulus cheque. Ambassador Jumeau said, "The financial crisis has weakened our resilience and ability to address climate change issues. At this critical juncture of survival, SIDS no longer have the capacity to respond to humanitarian evacuations, reconstruct their economies, and simultaneously deal with new battlegrounds created with sea-level rise." Mr Christopher explained that, bound by the UN Law of the Sea, rising sea levels would create far greater uncertainties than just islands and nearby coastal States. Many countries would experience a shift in their outer boundaries of the zones of valuable ocean territory, which could induce conflicting claims to ocean resources and rights. Even if SIDS could build sea walls to buttress their islands from escalating tides, they still would not be able to adapt to global carbon emissions forever, before they get swallowed into the sea.

### **Negotiating for a Survival Kit**

AOSIS leaders say that they lack the geopolitical leverage and economic powerhouse that other influential UN Member States bring to the negotiating table. Ambassador Jumeau asked, "What do we have? Yes, we

are holiday spots, but if you lose one, there will always be another one to travel to. What else do we have? Tuna. Well that will probably disappear before we do anyway." This is why AOSIS advocates that the world has a moral obligation to make sure "no island State is left behind." After negotiations, if the AOSIS proposal is considered, the immediate task will be to limit temperature increase for both short- and medium-term targets to less than 1.5&deg; Celsius; for the long-term, it will be to redesign the system to a sustainable pattern of low-carbon economic growth.

In the meantime, AOSIS countries are reaching the tipping point. "This is the mountain we are climbing. We are not scared. The deal won't be perfect but the best deal is possible", said Selwin Hart, First Secretary at the Permanent Mission of Barbados to the United Nations. "But if you listen to SIDS on climate change, you will get the best deal possible. By guaranteeing the existence of small island States, you save the entire global existence."

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